Lafayette Historical Society **NEWS**

Enlightening Our Community

Lafayette, California | April 2015 | Vol. 43, No. 1

Make your plans now to attend our next event:

Wednesday, May 6, 2015 at 7 p.m.
in the Lafayette Library & Learning Center's Community Hall.

Lafayette Historical Society's *Speaker Series*

Photograph of our beautiful San Francisco Bay taken during the construction of the Bay Bridge

"Water: A Photographic Journey from the San Francisco Bay to the Sources of the Sacramento River"

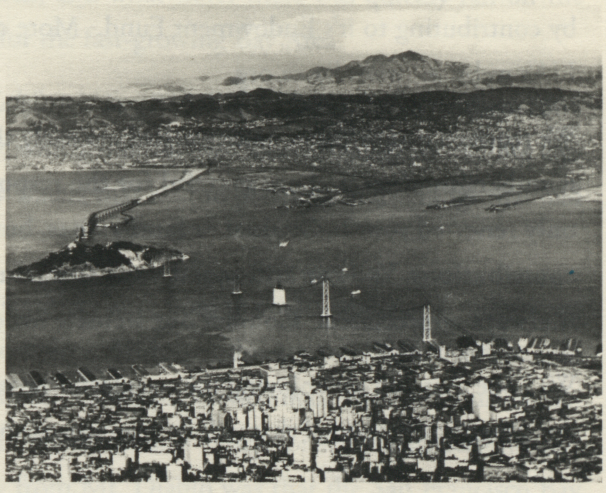
This will be the Historical Society's Annual Meeting – Dessert and Beverages will be served.

Speaker....Stuart Swiedler, creator of EastBayHillsProject.org
Date.....Wednesday, May 6, 2015 - ***Reservations Recommended***
Time.....7:00 p.m. – **Registration begins at 6:30 p.m.**
Place.....Lafayette Library & Learning Center – Community Hall
Donation Requested–**$10.00** LHS members; **$15.00** non-members requested
Kids under 14 Free with paying adult

For questions or reservations please call (925) 283-1848 or email Lafayette.History@comcast.net

"Water: A Photographic Journey from the San Francisco Bay to the Sources of the Sacramento River"

We all take for granted the ability to open the tap and enjoy water to drink, bathe in, or use around our homes. Overlooked is the impact of the taming of numerous creeks and diversion of flood waters from the Sacramento River in the 20th century toward development of the East Bay and the surrounding communities.



Join Stuart Swiedler, creator of EastBayHillsProject.org, as we board a train, fly in a small plane, and hike in the hills to retell the key events of this period.

This will be the Historical Society's Annual Meeting – Dessert and Beverages will be served.

$10.00 Donation requested from LHS members – Non-Members $15.00
Kids under 14 are free when accompanied by an adult

Contact LHS at (925) 283-1848 or Lafayette.History@comcast.net for reservations or additional information

President's Message

Spring is upon us and we're looking forward to gearing up at the Historical Society with more programs and regularly scheduled newsletters! We were short of volunteers last year and not able to be as active as we would have liked to have been.

We are following our March Speaker Series "It's Name was M.U.D. – a Story of Water" with "Water: a Photographic Journey from the San Francisco Bay to the Sources of the Sacramento River" with Stuart Swiedler, a very popular speaker in the area. We hope you can join us on May 6.

This year has brought some additional volunteer help to the History Room. **Ryan McKinley**, who is working on his MFA at St. Marys College, is conducting oral histories of longtime Lafayette residents. These interviews are being transcribed by volunteer **Andrew Van Etten**, and will be available on our website in the near future. The Society is appreciative of these efforts to capture the details of life in Lafayette in an earlier time.

Jay Nelson and **Jenna Tidd** have joined us recently. Jay's vast experience with archival projects is a great help. He is working with long-time volunteer and LHS supporter, **Ray Peters** in entering our large collection of maps into our PastPerfect software. Jenna's experience in social media is bringing life to our Facebook and Twitter feeds. Like us on Facebook https://www.facebook.com/LafayetteHistoricalSociety

Laura Torkelson's displays upstairs in the Library continue to exceed expectations. Visit the current 'Hood exhibit of the History of Burton Valley. You may be surprised what was there before Lafayette became the city it is today!

If you missed the celebration of Marechal Duncan's contributions to Lafayette as Citizen of the Year, you can visit the History Room any Saturday morning and Marechal will be happy to tell you how honored he was. AND the Historical Society is honored to have him as our Vice President and volunteer.

Lafayette's Town Hall is celebrating its Centennial this year and the Lafayette Improvement Association, the building's stewards, invite you to support the ongoing maintenance and upkeep efforts for the building by contributing to it's Endowment Fund. More details can be found on LIA's website: www.lia-ca.org.

Marechal Duncan receiving award

We reached out to many of our members early this year to renew their membership dues and are grateful for the response. Many of you not only renewed your individual or family dues, but also made additional contributions. You can still renew your annual membership in the Lafayette Historical Society….your support is always appreciated. Contact our website for details: www.lafayettehistory.org.

We hope that you are enjoying the wonderful weather and will make plans to visit the History Room soon. Watch for our programs in the fall that will be announced soon!

- Mary McCosker

Torrential Rains Not New in County History... and Neither are Droughts

By Ruth Bailey

Even though this current January was dry, at least we can read about local winters awash in rain a century and a half or two ago. The January 15th, 1965, *Lafayette Sun* took a look back at the rainfall records left from the California Mission era.

"That rainstorms in 1805 created statewide havoc was verified by the records of Southern mission padres. Proof of the record-breaking 1861-62 deluge was corroborated later when water marks were found in trees in the San Joaquin Valley, showing that a former flood had been fully six feet higher.

"The padres recorded a rainfall in 1819 so great that rivers changed their beds. Historians mentioned the winter of 1825-26, 1840 and 1846-47, when great numbers of stock were lost by drowning."

From the same sources we learn of extremely dry years. In fact, the Native Americans told of a year in which no rain fell at all—the drought of 1824, which caused cattle to die by the thousands. And the year 1831 was so dry [here I heard the voice of Johnny Carson's audience calling out: *"How dry was it?"*.....but I digress], Historian William Heath Davis wrote, that rancheros killed thousands of horses to preserve what little feed there was for their cattle.

Official weather records were kept beginning in 1849. From that year to 1914, Contra Costa County experienced 11 floods, and there were 21 drought years.

A 1970 history of the Municipal Utility District (entitled *Its name was M.U.D*), reported that the winter of 1850-51 had been unusually dry, a mere 7.1 inches of rainfall, and by summer the springs and creeks carried far less water than before. "Few at the time might have guessed, but the problem of water was to become the most vexatious and turbulent the area was to have over the next 60 years. It only grew more complex as communities expanded and natural water sources disappeared." And 1860 was a short rain year, as well, and what water there was quickly ran off the denuded slopes, where trees had been clear-cut to provide lumber for the fast-growing Bay Area.

But according to William Brewster, in his journal *Up and Down California in 1860-1864*, "Between November 1861 and January 31, 1862, 102 inches of rain fell in the Central Valley, which was one vast lake 250–300 miles long and 20–60 miles wide. The winds made high waves of the cold, muddy waters that beat to pieces farm dwellings that had withstood the flood waters.

"The course of the river itself could be told only by treetops. River steamers were used to get to ranches 14 miles from the river. Isolation from the east, where the Civil War raged, was complete. Bridges and roads were destroyed, so that the Overland could not operate. [Beginning in 1857, the Overland Mail Company carried mail from St. Louis to San Francisco twice a week.] Even the telegraph was not working, for in the Sacramento Valley, for some distance, the tops of the poles were under water. An eye-witness account of the view from Mt. Diablo was that the San Francisco Bay appeared small compared to the muddy sea to the east.

"Warehouses along the waterfront and their contents of wheat were swept away. Recurring floods brought more mud

Continued on page 5

Did You Know?

Your Lafayette Historical Society pays more than ***$4,000*** annually to the City of Lafayette to rent your History Room?

Our e-Newsletter reaches more than 250 people. If each of those folks donated just $5 to the Historical Society, those funds would greatly help support this organization that contributes so much to your community.

AND if each of the 380 people who "like" our Facebook page donated just $5 we'd have almost half of what we need to pay our bill to the City!

Did You Know?

"Old Betsy" our 1919 Model T Fire Truck who is enjoyed by kids of all ages in the July 4th Parade in Orinda and delivering Santa Claus to Plaza Park at Christmas is maintained by ***George Watson*** and a ***volunteer crew!*** She was recently fitted for a new gas tank and other workings and was a star at the Annual Chamber of Commerce Dog Town event.

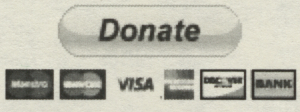
Just think how ***your donation*** could help support the efforts and expenses that are a result of restoring and maintaining this 95-year old gem and important part of Lafayette history.

George Wasson & Old Betsy

Did You Know?

Our Facebook Page www.facebook.com/LafayetteHistoricalSociety is maintained by ***Michael Troutman*** and ***Jenna Tidd*** who volunteer hours culling through photos to post on Facebook. Our page has an amazing following of folks "liking" and "commenting" on the photos. If every click would translate into just $1 donation we could more than support our efforts in archiving those photos.

AND WE MAKE IT EASY! You can donate right on our homepage www.LafayetteHistory.org with a simple click on the



Torrential Rains Not New in County History...and Neither are Droughts

Continued from page 3

and silt from upstream that filled the slough and overflowed into the town."

And one additional peril: "In 1862 the Bay Area was issued a rattlesnake warning, as the rattlers were washed down from the mountains on floating debris," Brewster reported.

As the song goes, we've seen fire and we've seen rain....along with sunny days we thought would never end. Two photos from the LHS archives demonstrate the yin and yang of local rainfall. The circa 1910 flood scene shows Henry Toler Brown ("Papa," according to writing on the photo margin) near the flooded Lafayette Creek at Oakland Ave. and Mt. Diablo. The other picture is of Dick Francis water witching during the drought of 1977. Any bets on how 2015 will turn out?

2014-2015 Board of Directors

President:.....Mary McCosker
Vice President:.....Marechal Duncan
Treasurer:.....Judie Peterson
Recording Secretary:.....Nancy Flood
Ruth Bailey Michael Troutman
John Otto George Wasson
Laura Torkelson
Contact Us:....History Room - 283-1848
- *or* - lafayette.history@comcast.net

Dick Francis water witching during drought 1977

Henry Toler Brown Flood of 1910

Lafayette Historical Society
P.O. Box 133
Lafayette, CA 94549
www.LafayetteHistory.org

Return Service Requested

Lafayette Historical Society Membership Application

(Please photocopy form for additional names)

Name: _____

Spouse: _____

Address: _____

City-Zip: _____

Phone: _____

E-mail: _____

Membership Categories and Annual Dues

(Please check one)

- ❑ Student Membership $10.00
- ❑ Individual Membership $25.00
- ❑ Family Membership $50.00
- ❑ Sponsor Membership $500.00

Please indicate areas of special interest

- ❑ Publicity
- ❑ Research-Genealogy
- ❑ Telephoning
- ❑ Displays
- ❑ Oral Histories
- ❑ History Room
- ❑ Data Base Entry of Photos
- ❑ Photo Collection
- ❑ News Clippings
- ❑ Fire Engine
- ❑ Walking Tours-Outreach
- ❑ Other_____

Please mail this application to:

Lafayette Historical Society
P.O. Box 133
Lafayette, CA 94549